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ABSTRACT

This paper examines strategies for urban school improvement within the realm of preschool, elementary, and secondary level programs, and systemwide programs. Examples of programs in each grade level area which are operating in different parts of the country are given. The following elements are identified as common to all successful programs: (1) well-organized and carefully executed plan; (2) dedicated staff; (3) diverse and interesting curriculum; (4) small size; and (5) clear and familiar goals. Parent, teacher, and student responsibilities are discussed, and the need to improve information utilization strategies within the school system is stressed. (JCD)

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"URBAN SCHOOLS"

Presented By

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Temple University

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STRATEGIES FOR URBAN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT
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From 1970-1973, Dr. Watson was Director of the Recruitment Leadership Training Institute for the Office of Education. In 1972, he served as Project Director for the National Policy Conference on Education for Blacks, sponsored by the Congressional Black Caucus. He is a member of the National Urban League Education Advisory Committee.

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INTRODUCTION

Our nation's urban public schools are experiencing a myriad of complex problems, none of which has a unitary cause or solution. One needs only to consider the types of problems and issues facing urban public education in order to begin to appreciate the difficulties associated with their resolution.

The dire financial plight of urban school systems nationwide confirms the interrelatedness and inextricable association of urban school problems to those of the city and region in which they are located. For example, three years ago, 1977, Cleveland's public schools narrowly avoided closing when Judge Frank J. Battisti ruled that they must remain open. It was our legal system that made the determination that the service Cleveland's schools provide must continue. In 1977-78, the Philadelphia public school system was able to remain open only because its Board of Education borrowed 50 million dollars from a consortium of lending agencies. While not as direct as Judge Battisti's order, but with the same result, non-educators made the critical determination that schools would remain open. The resultant loan agreement set two conditions which, in effect, established school policy. First, the school district must have a balanced budget and, two, its expenses could not exceed 7 percent of the previous year's budget. A more recent example of the financial difficulties of our nation's urban schools is the closing this past school year, 1979-80, of the Chicago public schools. Chicago, unlike Cleveland's and Philadelphia's public schools, was bailed out but with a heavy cost.

But financial difficulties are not the only problems encountered by urban schools. Urban schools are faced with the cost and consequences of increased violence and vandalism, teacher strikes and declines in student test scores. Just these few problems, which by no means is a comprehensive listing of school problems, dictate an immediate need for the continuation, at all levels, of efforts to improve urban schools. The words of Havinghurst and Loeb, spoken more than 30 years ago, provide historical insight of what today is an increasingly supported view regarding an essential determinant of the economic status of urban school systems. They observed:[1]

> The American School...reflects the socio-economic order in everything that it does; in what it teaches, who does the teaching, who does the hiring and firing of teachers, and what the children learn in and out of the classroom... The curricula of the secondary schools provide early pathways to success and failure, they operate in a different way on the several class levels, and they are used in a different way by the children of the higher and lower levels.

But as a matter of practice, our society does not always function based on the assumptions that our public schools are vital or that the condition of our public schools reflect the condition of our society. In an effort to improve urban schools, those of us who work in the profession must cooperate with each other and not operate in isolation of each other.

IMPORTANCE OF GATHERING

This forum is important because we have been given the opportunity to discuss how to improve urban schools. Our perspective regarding the challenge should be based on the job we perform each day. We should expect to hear and accept differing viewpoints. But we should also expect to develop shared conceptions and understandings. The workshop's title, "Strategies for Urban School Improvement", indicates that the realities that plague urban schools are not such that any one group or viewpoint is sufficiently comprehensive to effectively deal with them.

THE NEED FOR DEFINITION

It is critical to any discussion that definitions be made explicit. It is particularly important for us because we are dealing with complex problems. Too often, information that could be beneficial is presented without the benefits associated with defining terms. It is a fact that utilizing definitions facilitates the identification and clarification of task. Continued use of definitions fosters higher levels of distinction and precision. The use of definitions also enables us to determine areas of agreement and disagreement which is an important first step in problem resolution. The terms defined in this paper are few but are essential to this discussion. The term improvement, for example, means to be better; to make something beneficial. By definition, urban schools must begin to accept improvements, even if they are what educational jargon would term insignificant. It is important for us to note that we may be choosing between insignificant improvement and no improvement. Cooperation is another key word. It means working harmoniously together towards a common goal or objective. Coordination, an essential element for improvement, means arranging activities in the proper order. Strategy, on the other hand, is a design that incorporates what, how and when resources will be obtained, used and allocated. This paper is designed to provide an added dimension to your ideas about "Strategies for Urban School Improvement." But before strategies are discussed, we must understand our responsibilities.

PARENTS'/EDUCATORS'/STUDENTS' ROLES

Parents have a responsibility. They must provide support for the school staff. There are numerous instances in which staff members who are dedicated to improving the quality of education encounter resistance from within the system for policy reasons, or for personal and political reasons. In these instances, parent support is often crucial to the efforts of staff members involved; without it, they are isolated and vulnerable.

As much as we would like to believe that what goes on in schools is apolitical, or at least well-intentioned, the fact is that schools perform a governmental function, and they are subject to the conflicts that affect every agency of the government. Schools are political institutions, and their agents hold the precarious positions of diplomat, strategist, and warrior. Parents cannot afford to sit back and expect good school administration without being willing, when necessary, to take sides in support of what they feel is right for their children.

Parent involvement in the schools must not be limited to crisis situations. Rather, parents must join hands with other community forces to create an environment for continuous and uninterrupted learning. This means involvement in policy making and in design and evaluation of programs. Parents must fight for and expect high-quality performance from children, staff, board members, and elected officials. They must insist that good education become and remain a high-priority goal in their community.

Teachers have a responsibility. The teacher's role in educational accountability is not nearly so awesome as some have pictured it. The basic obligations of the teacher's role are simple: competence and a belief in the ability of children. Teachers must accept the fact that most parents want the best for their children, and they should respond to these aspirations positively and constructively rather than with warnings or prophecies of failure. Teachers must insist upon high standards for their students, and teachers must accept the responsibility for insuring that those who pass through school know more and cope better as a result of the experience.

Teachers have a responsibility to teach students about the world as it is, but they must also give students a vision of what the world can become. This vision must communicate to each student what his or her potential role in this future world can be. It must reveal possibilities more than limitations; it must offer inspiration rather than defeat. If teachers will combine the cognitive with the compassionate, they will make a significant contribution to school-family relations.

Students also have a responsibility. In all the talk about school and family, it is the student's role that is most often overlooked. We must remember that education is not something that is or can be done to children; it is something that children do for themselves with the assistance of their parents and educators.

THE CONDITION OF URBAN SCHOOLS

Demands placed upon public schools continue to multiply. The ever-changing nature of the demands exacerbates an already beleaguered public school system, particularly since school finances are decreasing while costs are increasing. Nonetheless, public schools are expected to effectively and efficiently perform. The never-ending need to better utilize resources coupled with demands to improve the delivery and substance of urban education highlight the need for new techniques. Hummel and Nagel put it this way:[2]

> ...new perspectives are needed, perspectives that will encompass not only our schools and our history, but also our urban institutions, their interrelationships, how they are to operate, and to what ends.

Such a revitalization of public education by definition requires new approaches which should be thoroughly explored and cautiously established. To do otherwise increases the potential for harm. The new math established across this country in the 1960's is an example of a program whose harmful

effects are being felt twenty years later. It is clear that the new math was too quickly instituted and suffered from a basic lack of understanding about its costs, risks and consequences. What resulted was lowered basic skills and test scores in elementary math.

Based on this cursory data about urban schools, is there any wonder why public education in general and urban education in particular is experiencing so many difficulties? The lexicon of terms associated with public education attests to the difficulties and account in part for the decline in public confidence. The litany reads: discipline, violence, vandalism, teacher burn-out, teacher strikes, adult illiteracy, spiraling costs, drugs, declining student performance; the list continues. There is a common characteristic shared by each of these terms. The common feature is that each term denotes negative conceptions about the institution and process of public education.

All is not lost. There is hope. Kepner and Tregoe suggested that failure to solve problems efficiently are not primarily due to individual ineptitude, but rather to deficiencies in the information system. More specifically, knowing why, how and when to use information. This is essential if the intent is to improve urban education. Harold Howe, vice president for public policy at the Ford Foundation, provides some much needed insight to guide our deliberations:[3]

> Bringing about a commitment to these purposes in our schools cannot be legislated by state or national government. It is more the business of local school boards and local superintendents and still more the concern of principals and teachers. But state and national governments can help in two ways: by providing funds and by refraining from writing detailed prescriptions about how they are to be used. The best rethinking and reform of practice in the schools will come from persons who encounter children every day, not from persons removed from that experience.

Howe cautioned:

> One of those myths is that Americans can solve any problem in short order if only they will turn their energies to the task. The experience of the past 20 years in the schools with the related issues of school desegregation and school improvement should by now have convinced us that as far as the schools are concerned, this is indeed a myth. We are engaged in a long, difficult struggle with intractable and multifaceted difficulties. We shall still be so engaged at the onset of the 1990s. There is no quick fix.

PROGRAM STRATEGIES

The number of program improvement strategies are infinite. These examples focus on improvement strategies that seek to expand the definition of who and what is involved in the educational process. The following is a brief description of how a variety of urban school systems defined their efforts.

I. PRE-SCHOOL/ELEMENTARY LEVEL

- Newark, Delaware -- Pre-school Readiness Outreach Program (PROP)

  The purpose of this program is to share with parents of three to five year olds ideas that would help their children develop appropriate beginning reading skills. Parents receive nine monthly newsletters that suggest ways to plan reading activities. They also attend weekly workshops, where they learn how to construct inexpensive educational games.

- Dallas, Texas -- "Partners in Learning"

  Preschoolers' through sixth graders' progress in reading, math and writing is charted. Parents are given a copy of their child's progress and a booklet entitled "Tips for Parents."

- Dade County, Florida -- "Extended School Program"

  This after-school program provided tutoring in math and reading. Parents are an integral part of the educational plan developed for their children. They participate as tutors and advisors. In addition, parent leadership training workshops and the Parent Advisory Council provide mechanisms not only for training, but also the dissemination of information on strategies designed to strengthen the linkages between the school and the family.

II. SECONDARY LEVEL

At the secondary level, several systems are attempting to prepare teenagers for adult living.

- Washington, D.C. — Cardoza High School

  Students are given the opportunity to reassess and clarify their ideas about the family and childrearing. Courses are a combination of classroom instruction and on-site training of children in day care and elementary school programs. The primary goals for the program are to provide teenagers with preparation for parenthood while simultaneously introducing them to the world of work.

- New London, Connecticut -- "Young Parents Program"

  Designed for teenage mothers and pregnant teenagers, the intent of this program is to help parents develop child-oriented observation skills and heighten their awareness of child development.

III. SYSTEM-WIDE PROGRAMS

While many programs identify a particular school population, many others are designed for the entire school system. Two examples:

- o Oakland, California -- "Master Plan Citizen's Committee"

  The late Dr. Marcus Foster came to Oakland with a mandate to "open the system." He believed that restoration of confidence in the school system was predicated on community involvement. As a result, parents began to address the politics of education and the problems associated with educating young people. This was accomplished through meetings and parent leadership workshops.

- o San Francisco, California -- "Family Life Education"

  Parents are invited to mini-presentations for proposed new courses covering such topics as sexuality, contraception, and homosexuality. This is done before the same information is presented to students. Parent input is used in course content and design.

The program partnerships between urban schools and the larger community simultaneously reveals diversity and similarity among the programs. The following programs, designed for high school students, are illustrative:

- The Philadelphia School District - The Parkway Program 1969

  The Parkway's philosophy is that the community must be an active partner in the learning process. An important aspect of this partnership is the use of the institutions in the city as learning centers. In addition to the state-required offerings, the Parkway Program allows the student the opportunity to take independent study which is used as a mechanism to explore one's interest.[4] A student described the program this way:

  "A special school to which we can escape from those problems in our old situation which we no longer can stand; a place where we are trusted, cared for, and not "hassled" while we find out who we are..."

  Parkway has matured. The original goals which were not observable have been revised. For example, an early program aim was to have a program that was "a model of education in keeping with major traditions of American life." Today the indication is that the program has a clearer vision of its goal. For example, a program is for Parkway students to learn to use all available community resources. The program is successful in part because of its small size and its diverse curriculum.

- The Los Angeles Unified School District - The Skills Training Educational Program (STEP) 1971

STEP operates based on the philosophy that business skills could best be taught in a business environment. STEP is designed for high school seniors and adults.

The strategic program goal is immediate employment upon completion of the course and graduation from high school. One of the specific objectives of the program is to provide an opportunity for students to gain an appreciation of the physical requirements of a work day.

STEP is a partnership between the Los Angeles School District and the Security National Bank which also supports five other School District programs. The program's high regard is evident by the level of commitment to and position of the program within the bank's organizational structure. STEP operates under the aegis of the Vice President of Community Economic Development through an assistant vice president. Seventy job training classes are taught in 17 skill areas by bank employees and in bank facilities.

The Chairman of Security's Board of Directors cited three factors critical to the bank's successful involvement in the program: 1) total commitment, 2) willingness to give financial and other support, and 3) getting the right people involved. This program's success is attributed in part to:

1. The willingness of top management officials to take the risk of having young people work in the bank.

2. The structured program which provides numerous and varied activities from which students can make their choice.

3. Making jobs available to those students who complete the course.

Two years earlier, the Philadelphia School District, in cooperation with business and industry representatives, developed a program strategy for low-achieving students.

The High School Academy Programs offer them job training and work assignments in three areas: electrical, automotive and business. The program's success is its strategic goal to provide students with employment after graduation.

- The Dallas School District - The Arts Magnet High School - 1976

This program was developed as a direct result of orders to desegregate Dallas' public schools. The issue of desegregation affects all aspects of city life. Consequently, the Dallas

Chamber of Commerce organized a group of business and community leaders to plan new school programs.

The philosophy of this program is that if quality education is provided in an area of student interest, the racial composition of the school will be less of a factor than program quality. Based on enrollments for 1979-80, racial desegregation has been attained at the Arts Magnet High School: 45% white, 45% black and 10% Mexican American. The Arts Magnet has four clusters: music, dance, theatre and visual arts. One aspect of a program's success is what its graduates are doing. In regard to desegregation, the Arts Magnet's success is evident: 76% are pursuing higher education; 10% neither studying nor working; 4% in the armed forces; and 8% could not be located.* The program has attributed its successes to:

1. Support of the Chamber of Commerce

2. Staff and student dedication

3. Small size

4. Program quality

But probably the most pronounced success is the realization by staff and students that diverse ethnic groups can interact in a cooperative manner.

ANOTHER EXAMPLE

Often, school improvement comes not because of a program but because of a dynamic individual. A case in point is the legend of Mr. T. Forty-five years ago, a man named Mr. T. was selected by the school board to become principal of the school in Gary, Indiana that was "built for the little colored children." Although the board did not know it, they had in fact, through this appointment, set a revolution under way. Mr. T. had decided to make Roosevelt the best public school in the country for poor black children--and he proceeded to do precisely that.

He began by recruiting dedicated, loyal and competent teachers from all over the country. He interviewed and approved each assignment personally. Slowly, an extraordinary corps of creative, committed professionals was formed. Together, they developed not only a strong academic program but also a wide range of extracurricular activities. Community-sponsored dinners, raffles, dances, and recitals provided additional funds for uniforms, furniture and equipment. The school became a showplace in the community. That the school was successful was due to the efforts of past and current students, teachers, administrators and parents.

*Does not total 100%

CONCLUSION/STRATEGIC ELEMENTS

It seems clear that before programs are developed, there must be a concerted effort by each of us to seek improvements in ourselves. No school improvement strategy will succeed if its focus does not appropriately address student as well as programmatic needs.

Regardless of the strategy employed, there are common elements inherent to each successul program. Some of them are:

1. A well thought-out and executed plan.

2. A dedicated staff.

3. Diverse and interesting curriculum.

4. Small size.

5. Goals that are known and not vague.

It is obvious that successful strategies must be premised on the following elements:

1. Goals and objectives tell what the organization seeks to attain.

2. Means of obtaining goals and objectives.

3. Determination and allocation of resources.

4. Implementation--how the goals and objectives will be accomplished.

5. Feedback--continuous evaluation and control of the program.

Cooperation and coordination are essential ingredients of any effective strategy formulation. This is necessary in order to appropriately integrate diverse viewpoints.

It is apparent that there are no easy answers. The 80's challenge us to be <u>active</u> in the struggle for school improvement.

FOOTNOTES

1 William Lloyd Warren, Robert J. Havinghurst and Martin B. Loeb, Who Shall Be Educated?, New York: Harper and Row, 1944, p. xi.

2 Raymond P. Hummel and John M. Nagel, Urban Education in America, New York: Oxford University Press, 1973, p. viii.

3 Harold Howe, II, "The Brown Decision, and the Schools in the 1980's", The College Board Review, Spring 1980, No. 115, p. 37.

4 National Urban Coalition, Memorandum, "Documentation of Parkway Program", Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, March, 1980, p. 17.

Information on the Parkway, STEP, and Art Magnet Programs was obtained from National Urban Coalition memorandums.